

Monika Buch – Line and Module

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Monika Buch's family came from Germany originally. Her grandfather, Maximo Buch, left Halle an der Saale at the end of the nineteenth century and, after travels that led him through France and the North of Spain, he arrived at Valencia, where he immediately felt at home and set up a brush factory in a former monastery together with a German friend.

Monika was born in Valencia on March 5th 1936. A few months after, the Spanish Civil War broke out, whereupon mother Buch escaped to Germany with her four children and was interned as a foreign refugee in Bad Godesberg near Bonn. At the end of the war, the family set out to return to Valencia by boat from Hamburg, but halfway across the Channel the ship made a sudden U-turn because Britain had declared war to Germany and it was no longer safe to continue. They travelled from Hamburg to Genoa by train instead and took the boat to Barcelona, where they were welcomed by father Buch, who had arrived there beforehand.

After finishing German secondary school in Valencia and later in Barcelona, Monika first had to perform community service for women in order to obtain a foreign passport, for she intended to go on to study art the Hamburg Academy. Her mother, however, encouraged her to go to the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HFG) in Ulm in Southern Germany, where Swiss artist Max Bill, himself a former student at the Bauhaus that was closed by the Nazis in 1933, was presiding at the time. Bill himself had designed the school building, set up the curriculum, and invited former Bauhaus teachers who had fled to America to come over and give courses.

Monika describes her first impression of the Hochschule as follows:

“It was a clear and sunny, yet cold day in January 1956 when I first saw the school building on top the ‘Kuhberg’ hill outside Ulm. I was deeply impressed. Never before had I seen something as unique and completely self-evident. I clearly remember the profound impact it had on me. It radically changed my life.”

Many theoretical classes at the HFG were inspired by *Gestalt* as the psychology of form. Principally, it explains vision as something beyond the mere sum of things

visible. For example, the perception of a figure and its background are considered as a co-emergence that transcends mere shape.

Within this framework, Thomas Maldonado included assignments on themes such as figure vs. background, spatiality, ambiguity, exactness vs. inexactness, and black as a colour in his courses on visual methodology. Each day, a given theme had to be translated into drawings. Maldonado would introduce the theory, and then the students went off to create their images – with such enthusiasm and intense focus that they often kept going until eleven at night, when the key to the building had to be returned to the *Hausmeister* (janitor). Next morning, thirty different solutions were discussed before a new theme was introduced.

Other theoretical courses followed the same procedure: Joseph Albers' on Linear Perspectives, Herman von Baravalle's on Geometry as Language, and the ones by Helene Nonné Schmidt, Paul Klee's former assistant of Colour Theory at the Bauhaus.

The latter two have been of great importance to Monika Buch's later development as an artist. In her two years at HFG, geometry was one of her passions, as the work she made there clearly reveals. Even today, geometry remains the principle from which she probes visual layout in terms of the possibilities of lines, modules, and shapes that emerge from rotations and shifts. It also helps her create the impossible figures that suggest a three-dimensional reality, yet exist in the two-dimensional plane only - visual enigmas that manage to evoke emotional tension in the viewer. Her use of colour in the Ulm days is as important to her as it is typical of the period, according to the artist.

After her stay in Ulm, Monika Buch moved to Utrecht, The Netherlands, where she still lives today, to study pedagogics and child psychology at Utrecht University. In her spare time she spent two years designing wooden children's toys for ADO workshop in Bilthoven, a number of which were included in the 1956 *Kinderspel* ('Child's Play') exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

After completing her studies in 1972, she pursued the exploration of the interrelation of form and colour that began in Ulm, and produced her first two-dimensional works.

It all starts with a question that beckons an answer, or an idea that needs formulation. Monika Buch is fascinated by perception: "What am I seeing? And how does it fit together?" She has a predilection for themes and variations. Aesthetics do count, but only as a secondary aspect. For, pleasing the eye is only part of it; it should, in addition, attract the attention or, even, provoke unease.

Buch's body of work shows no strictly linear development, because she tends to rework ideas from earlier works, put them to the test, and elaborate on them in alternative techniques. Thus, with the exception of the work she did in Ulm, it consists of groups of works that defy 'periods'. This became the starting point for the present exhibition *Monika Buch, Line and Module*: related works that start from lines and those that are based on modular repetitions of shapes or elements. Two further groups presents 'impossible' figures and stamps that play with exactness by variations of opaqueness.

In 2015, José de la Mano Galleries in Madrid first exhibited Monika Buch's work under the title *Monika Buch, Hispanic at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm 1956-1958*. The exhibition at Alicante University brings together a concise retrospective of sixty years of work to pay homage to an artist from the community of Valencia who now, at eighty-one years of age, fondly remembers Sunday bathing at the beach of El Saler when it used to be deserted, and her summer holidays at the family's summer retreat in Paterna, just outside Valencia, where she keeps returning with her husband even today: a place that reminds her of a happy childhood and that keeps inspiring fresh ideas to be taken home to Utrecht and translated into new work.

Translation: Pieter Kiewiet de Jonge